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Herbed White Bean Spread

Serves 4 to 6

This fantastic spread is good to serve on its own with grilled bread, or you may want to add an array of toppings. As with other bean dips, the wines here can vary from subtle, to enjoy the light earthy essence of the beans, as with a sparkling white, to bold, for example a medium-bodied Merlot to mingle with the herbs and citrus.

2 tbsp olive oil

1 small red onion, coarsely chopped

4 cloves garlic, cut in half lengthwise

One 15.5 oz/445-g can cannellini beans, rinsed and drained

2 tbsp chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

1 tsp chopped fresh chives

1 tsp chopped fresh thyme

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 tbsp crème fraîche

1 tbsp fresh lemon juice, or to taste

Basic Bruschetta (see below), crostini (see below), or crackers for serving

Roasted red or yellow bell pepper/capsicum strips, pimientos, seeded and chopped *piquillo* peppers, chopped black or green olives, anchovy fillets, caramelized onions, or capers, or a combination for garnish

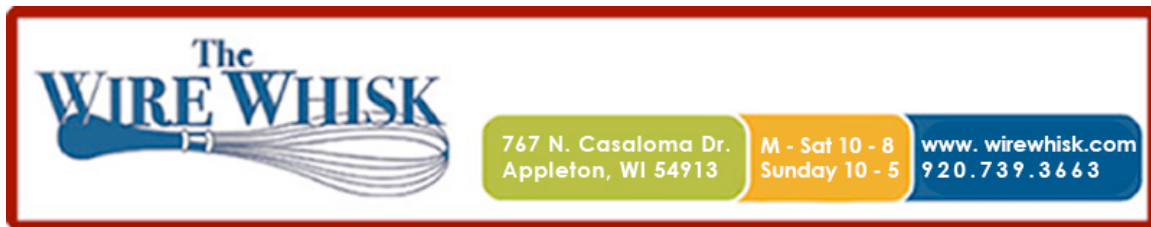
Heat the olive oil in a large sauté pan over medium heat. Add the onion and garlic and cook, stirring often, until softened and lightly golden, about 5 minutes. Add the beans, parsley, chives, thyme, and salt and pepper to taste and cook, stirring occasionally, until the beans are heated through and the flavors have blended, about 10 minutes. Remove from the heat and let cool slightly.

When the bean mixture is cool enough to handle, transfer to a food processor. Add the crème fraîche and lemon juice and process until smooth. Taste and adjust the seasoning with salt, pepper, and lemon juice, if necessary. Process again if needed just to combine.

Serve at once with the grilled bread and garnishes of your choice alongside.

Make-Ahead: The bean spread will keep, tightly covered in the refrigerator, for up to 3 days. Bring to room temperature and garnish before serving.

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Basic Bruschetta

Makes 12 toasts, serves 4 to 6

Bruschetta are simply grilled crusty bread slices rubbed with garlic and brushed with olive oil. They can be prepared on a charcoal or gas grill, in a grill pan, or in the oven for the desired crunch and a little pleasant charred flavor. Cook as many slices as will fit in a single layer and turn them only once, until they are nicely grill-marked or golden brown and crispy.

Six 1/2-in/12-mm slices country or sourdough bread
3 large cloves garlic, peeled and cut in half lengthwise
About 1/2 cup/120 ml olive oil

To grill the bruschetta, prepare a medium-hot fire for direct grilling in a charcoal grill/barbecue, preheat a gas grill to medium-high, or heat a stove-top grill pan over medium heat. Arrange the bread slices in a single layer on the grill rack or in the pan and grill, turning once, until they are golden brown and crispy and slightly charred around the edges, about 3 minutes per side. Transfer to a platter. Run the garlic halves over one side of the bread and brush lightly with the olive oil

To make the bruschetta in the oven, preheat to 450°F/230°C/gas 8. Arrange the bread slices in a single layer on a baking sheet/tray and bake, turning once, until golden brown and crispy, about 3 minutes per side. Transfer to a platter. Rub the garlic halves over one side of the bread and brush lightly with the olive oil.

Crostini

Brush slices of baguette with olive oil and pop them in a 400°F/200°C/gas 6 oven for a few minutes until lightly golden and you have an instant supply of the European-style toasts popularly known as crostini; serve warm or at room temperature with any variety of accompaniments you like.